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AUTHOR Stavitsky, Alan G.
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ABSTRACT

The originators of municipal radio station WNYC foresaw radio as a means of extending city government and an instrument to educate, inform, and entertain the citizens. Because the municipal radio concept emerged in the early 1920s, before the medium's industrial structure was entrenched, an opportunity existed to develop an innovative model of broadcasting. Grover Whalen, New York City's Commissioner of Plant and Structures and Maurice E. Connolly, Queens Borough president were instrumental in getting the station on the air. WNYC began broadcasting on July 8, 1924. What distinguished WNYC from commercial stations was the presentation of civic education programs, health information, and "police alarms." WNYC was hampered, however, by political and economic pressures, limiting its impact on New York City's civic life. Programming deficiencies and disputes were compounded by serious technical and regulatory difficulties. A committee of three prominent local radio executives reported to mayor Fiorello LaGuardia on October 25, 1934 that the station was in a "rundown condition" and made recommendations for increasing the station's competitiveness. Programming in the late 1930s was dominated by classical music, consumer service programs, and educational programs. The station's program schedule lacked substantial discussion of public affairs, with the exception of its broadcast of the meetings of the New York City Council from 1938 to 1940. The failure of New York City's municipal broadcasting experiment illuminates the chronic inability of noncommercial broadcasters to define their mission and play a central role on the United States airwaves. (Eighty-seven notes are included.) (RS)

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# New York City's Municipal Broadcasting Experiment: WNYC, 1922-1940

Alan G. Stavitsky
School of Journalism and Communication
University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-1275
(503) 346-5848
Internet: AGS@OREGON.UOREGON.EDU

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# New York City's Municipal Broadcasting Experiment: WNYC, 1922-1940

*"It is my opinion that the municipality cannot do better in its plan of carrying to the people useful knowledge and healthful entertainment than to establish a broadcasting station"*
--Maurice E. Connolly, Queens Borough President, 1922[1]

The convergence of Progressive reform and an intriguing new technology -- radio -- brought forth an experiment in municipal broadcasting in New York City. The originators of municipal station WNYC foresaw radio as a means of extending city government, an instrument to educate, inform and entertain the citizens. WNYC's emphasis contrasted with the educational model within which most of the rest of non-commercial radio evolved, and from which contemporary public radio developed. City officials conceived of WNYC as a *municipal* station, as opposed to an educational station or a commercial station. Because the municipal radio concept emerged in the early 1920s, before the medium's industrial structure was entrenched, an opportunity existed to develop an innovative model of broadcasting.

However, in practice, the station's leaders lacked the practical skills and vision needed to actualize the concept of municipal broadcasting. Further, WNYC was hampered by political and economic pressures, limiting its impact in New York City's civic life. In 1993 city government continues to hold WNYC's license, though few links

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[1]Maurice E. Connolly, *Letter to Board of Estimate and Apportionment*, City of New York, March 17, 1922. Records of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, Volume 43, Calendar #138, Entry #4289, Municipal Archives and Records Center, City of New York (hereafter cited as MARC).

remain between city and station, and WNYC's program fare is indistinguishable from that of most U.S. urban public radio outlets.[2] This historical episode reflects the difficulty of utilizing electronic media to foster democractic processes. Further, the failure of New York City's municipal broadcasting experiment illuminates the chronic inability of noncommercial broadcasters to define their mission and play a central role on the U.S. airwaves.

This article will describe WNYC's origins and the early years of municipal broadcasting, through 1940.[3] Concluding sections will assess the outcome of the municipal broadcasting experiment, and its implications.

**Origins of WNYC**

The rise of urban liberalism and the Progressive Movement were central to the creation of WNYC. During the period before radio emerged, New York City's political environment was in transition. The nature of the Tammany Hall political machine changed in the first two decades of the twentieth century.[4] Responding to the clamor for reform both from within and outside the machine, machine politicians supported policies to ameliorate the problems of the city's ethnic working classes. A concomitant trend was the

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[2]The City of New York holds licenses for the original municipal station, WNYC-AM, as well as WNYC-FM and WNYC-TV.

[3]The nature of WNYC's broadcast service, as with other non-commercial stations, changed with the onset of World War II. Stations modified their programming to provide war-related news, talks, public service announcements, as well as patriotic music. The increased emphasis upon news and information had significant implications for contemporary public radio. See Alan G. Stavitsky, *From Pedagogic to Public: The Development of U.S. Public Radio's Audience-Centered Strategies--WOSU, WHA, and WNYC, 1930-1987* (Doctoral Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1990), 177-179; "WNYC sais it gives 48% of time to war," *New York Times*, 12 May 1942, 13.

[4]John D. Buenker, *Urban Liberalism and Progressive Reform* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 31-41.

emergence of the Progressive Movement after the turn of the century. A leading chronicler of the movement, Hofstadter, described Progressivism as "an attempt to develop the moral will, the intellectual insight, and the political and administrative agencies to remedy the accumulated evils and negligences of a period of industrial growth."[5] Progressive legislators in New York State, with the support of the city's machine politicians, built an impressive record of social welfare legislation between 1910 and 1920.[6]

Against this backdrop, radio emerged. With the potential to reach urban masses instantaneously, the new technology piqued the interest of Grover Whalen, New York City's Commissioner of Plant and Structures. A gregarious, self-promoting politician, nicknamed "Whalen the Magnificent" by local reporters, Whalen was known for his work in transit matters, such as lobbying for new bridges and tunnels to relieve the city's traffic congestion.[7] Whalen believed the nascent medium might improve the function of city government, especially the delivery of police and fire services, education, and as a way to inform citizens of the activities of city agencies.[8] Early in 1922 he approached Maurice E. Connolly, Queens Borough president, to suggest that Connolly ask the city's Board of Estimate and

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[5]Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement, 1900-1915* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963), 2-3.

[6]Buenker, 37-38; Joseph Huthmacher, *Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 24-40.

[7]Edward L. Bernays, *Biography of an idea: Memoirs of public relations counsel Edward L. Bernays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 361-362; Grover Whalen, *Mr. New York* (New York: Putnam, 1955). Bernays noted that Whalen in 1923 considered running for the presidency, an idea he later dropped.

[8]Grover Whalen, Transcript of interview for *Columbia University Oral History Research Project*, November 22, 1950. Municipal Reference Library, City of New York (hereafter cited as MRL).

Apportionment to establish a city-owned and operated broadcasting station.

Connolly agreed and wrote a letter to the board, detailing radio's potential for transmitting information, instruction and entertainment "upon a vaster scale and therefore of a higher class than has heretofore been possible."[9] Further, Connolly suggested that "the public will be best served if this new field of activity be municipalized. No private corporation should be depended upon to develop...so important a function."[10] On March 17, 1922, the board adopted Connolly's resolution calling for appointment of a committee to study the issue.[11] The committee, appointed by Mayor John Hylan, was chaired by department-store owner Rodman Wanamaker and included Grover Whalen.[12] The study committee reported back on May 2, 1922, that "the importance of municipal broadcasting was so far-reaching, and its possibilities so limitless,...the city would be derelict in its duty were it not to establish a Municipal Broadcasting Station."[13] On June 2, 1922, the board appropriated $50,000 for the purchase and installation of a broadcasting station to be located in the Manhattan Municipal

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[9]Connolly letter.

[10]Connolly letter.

[11]Department of Plant and Structures, City of New York, *Report for the Year 1922*, 142 (MRL).

[12]Wanamaker's appointment is significant in that he was a noted radio enthusiast. The family-owned stores in Philadelphia and New York were equipped with wireless telegraphy in 1911. It was at the New York store that David Sarnoff became famous for his telegraphy during the Titanic disaster in 1912. In March 1922 the Wanamaker store in Philadelphia obtained a broadcast license. Both stores later became known for sponsoring organ concerts. See Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States to 1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 76-77, 100, 158.

[13]Department of Plant and Structures, 142.

Building; the Bureau of Municipal Broadcasting was situated within the Department of Plant and Structures, of which Whalen was commissioner.[14]

Meanwhile, as hundreds of stations took to the airwaves during the early 1920s, the question of how to finance the nascent medium took on urgency. An early forum for discourse was *Radio Broadcast* magazine. In its first issue, May 1922, the magazine offered three proposals for funding radio stations. "The most attractive one," according to *Radio Broadcast*, was "the endowment of a station by a public spirited citizen."[15] Another option was voluntary public contribution to a fund controlled by an elected board.[16] A third idea, which the magazine called "probably the most reasonable way," was municipal financing. [17] The editors pointed out that cities spent large sums of money annually putting on public lectures and concerts attended by relatively small audiences; larger numbers of people, the magazine reasoned, could be reached if the same events were broadcast.[18] It is interesting to note that New York City had already begun to study the issue of municipal financing by the time the magazine came out and that *Radio Broadcast*'s proposals did not include advertising as a means to finance the new medium.

The start of broadcasting on WNYC was delayed on several fronts, first by the reluctance of the U.S. Department of Commerce

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[14]Department of Plant and Structures, 142.

[15]"Radio currents: An editorial interpretation," *Radio Broadcast*, May 1922, 3.

[16]"Radio currents," 3.

[17]"Radio currents," 4.

[18]Ironically, despite its call for municipal financing, *Radio Broadcast* would later attack WNYC for using taxpayers' money to provide New York City's mayor with an outlet for political "propaganda of the most biased sort," which was to become a frequent criticism of the station. See "Radio currents," *Radio Broadcast*, January 1925, 475.

to license a municipal station out of concern that city financing would be socialistic. Whalen discussed the need for the station with Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, who "had to be convinced."[19] Accordingly, Whalen stressed that the station would provide the city a means to inform its citizens of the activities of city agencies, for emergency police and fire information, and for educational uses. Once Hoover relented, AT&T declined to sell Whalen transmitter equipment nor provide telephone lines for remote broadcasts, instead urging the city to patronize WEAF, AT&T's "toll-broadcasting" station in New York City. Whalen's response was indignant: "The great City of New York subsidiary to a commercial company? Decidedly no!"[20] Whalen eventually was able to import a used transmitter from Brazil for WNYC's use.[21]

**WNYC's First Decade of Broadcasting**

WNYC began broadcasting on July 8, 1924, sharing a frequency with commercial station WMCA. Early programs featured speeches by the mayor; city agency department heads speaking about the role and budget of their agencies; and musical presentations by the Police Band, the Department of Street Cleaning Band, and local orchestras.[22] Station officials soon realized they needed to justify

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[19]Whalen interview, 11.

[20]Lloyd Espenschied, Transcript of interview for *Columbia University Oral History Research Project*, 1963, 47 (MRL).

[21]Whalen interview, 8.

[22]"City Radio Plant Opened By Mayor," *New York Times* (9 July 1924),7; "City Radio Station Found Abused For Political Ends, With Selfish Aims Supplanting Public Benefit," *New York Herald Tribune* (13 May 1925), 8; "Hylan Opens City's $50,000 Radio Station," *New York Herald Tribune* (9 July 1924), 13; Irving F. Luscombe, *WNYC: 1922-1940; The Early History of a Twentieth-Century Urban Service* (Doctoral Dissertation, New York University, 1968), 58-59. Luscombe's discussion of WNYC's early programs was drawn from a Works Progress Administration analysis of program logs no longer extant in the MRL. The WPA data was compiled by writers commissioned in the late 1930s to write a book on the history of radio in New York City. The book was

their existence by serving the civic needs of New Yorkers and by offering programs not available elsewhere. What distinguished WNYC from commercial stations in its first decade of operation was the presentation of three kinds of programs: civic education, such as lectures on the Municipal Reference Library and information about civil service; health information, including tips on child-rearing; and "police alarms," which were requests for information on missing persons, criminal suspects and stolen cars.[23] In essence, WNYC functioned as a "bulletin board" for city government, featuring speeches by the mayor and other city officials, as well as accounts of public meetings.[24] This policy of service was formalized in 1930 when the city council passed legislation directing WNYC to operate "for the instruction, enlightenment, entertainment, recreation and welfare of the inhabitants of the city."[25] However, even the station's official history acknowledged that "(d)uring WNYC's first ten years, its programs were generally quite dull, and the station lacked...creative leadership."[26]

During its early years the station also suffered from charges of political abuse of the airwaves, bearing out the concerns of some critics who initially objected to a municipal station on grounds that it could become a mayor's soapbox. Mayor John Hylan, believing that

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never completed. See WPA Historical Records Survey, Box 3758, Municipal Archives, City of New York.

[23]Luscombe, 65; Seymour M. Siegel, "The Voice of New York City," *Rockaway Review* (June 1951), 55-56 (MRL); Rebecca B. Rankin, "A Radio Entrance," *Wilson Bulletin for Librarians* (May-June 1934), 527 (MRL).

[24]"Breakdown of Programs, October 1929," reprinted in Luscombe, appendix; Claudia J. Keenan, *WNYC* (New York: WNYC Foundation, 1985), 5.

[25]Local Law #5 of the City of New York for 1930 in relation to the establishment, operation and maintenance of radio broadcasting station WNYC, 1930 Administrative Code, City of New York (MRL).

[26]Keenan, 5.

most of New York City's 10 newspapers were biased against him, began the practice of reaching the public directly by making speeches over WNYC that railed against his enemies. An exemplar came amid a conflict with Republican state legislators on a public transit matter. Hylan, a Democrat, went before the municipal station's microphone to attack:

> the mendacity of the corporation syncophants of the Republican party because the transit plank in the Republican state platform...represents the desperate eleventh-hour attempt of a discredited...crowd to rehabilitate themselves in the eyes of the people whom they have betrayed shamefully and wantonly.[27]

Hylan's broadcasts became a contentious local political issue. An anti-Hylan newspaper, the *Herald Tribune*, responded with a four-part series in May 1925 criticizing WNYC as a "propaganda mill."[28] The *New York Times* was more sanguine, noting that Hylan had done "what any Mayor would do with the same facility for defending and explaining his policies and achievements."[29] A good-government group, the Citizens Union, went to court, seeking to block the city from operating WNYC.[30] Failing that, the Citizens Union won an injunction stopping the mayor and members of his administration from using WNYC "for personal political purposes as distinguished

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[27]Quoted in "WNYC is dedicated by Hylan to city 'boosting,' but his anvil chorus proves its chief tune," *New York Herald Tribune* (15 May 1925), 8.
[28]"Closing city radio to politics is advocated as only remedy for misuse by Hylan regime," *New York Herald Tribune* (16 May 1925), 6.
[29]"Other things are far more serious," *New York Times* (18 July 1925), 12.
[30]*Fletcher v. Hylan*, 211 NYS 397 (1925).

from general city purposes."[31] Though later mayors such as Jimmy Walker and Fiorello LaGuardia would also come under criticism for making political speeches over WNYC,[32] station managers would adopt a cautious attitude regarding programming that might offend important constituencies.

Programming deficiencies and disputes were compounded by serious technical and regulatory difficulties. At a time when most New York stations had moved their transmitters to the meadows of New Jersey and Long Island, WNYC's transmitter adjoined its studios, atop the Municipal Building in lower Manhattan. As a result, engineers estimated that 80 percent of the station's 500-watt signal was absorbed by the building's steel structure, making it difficult to receive an audible WNYC signal throughout the city.[33] Further, a long-running dispute with a commercial competitor -- WMCA, which coveted the municipal station's frequency and evening broadcast allocation -- culminated in a Federal Radio Commission (FRC) order in 1933 restricting WNYC to daytime broadcasting only.[34]

Against this backdrop, Fiorello H. LaGuardia took office as mayor of New York City on January 1, 1934. He promptly snubbed WNYC by delivering his inaugural address from the studios of NBC.[35]

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[31] *Fletcher v. Hylan*, 211 NYS 727 (1925).

[32] WNYC was also challenged for broadcasting the police and fire department's Holy Name Communion breakfasts. Two lawsuits claiming the broadcasts violated Constitutional separation of church and state were dismissed by judges. See *Ford v. Walker*, 229 App. Div. 775 (1930); *Lewis v. LaGuardia*, 282 NY 757 (1939).

[33] Luscombe, 148.

[34] For more on the WNYC-WMCA dispute, see *City of New York v. Federal Radio Commission*, 35 F2d 115 (1929); "Closing of WNYC Denied in N.Y.C." *Broadcasting* (15 January 1934), 14; Keenan, 5.

[35] Kessner, 261.

With the city in a Depression-era fiscal crisis and LaGuardia pledging to eliminate city departments,[36] rumors circulated that the municipal radio station would be closed or sold to private owners.[37] Several local commercial stations, anticipating WNYC's demise, petitioned the FRC for expanded broadcast hours or a switch to WNYC's frequency.[38] The municipal station's future was further jeopardized in June of 1934 when LaGuardia was angered by a broadcast that he considered commercial. Listening at his home to a program of Italian lectures and songs, the mayor was troubled by an announcer's frequent references to the program's sponsor, an Italian newspaper.[39] LaGuardia telephoned WNYC and was told that it was station policy to mention the names of program sponsors; WNYC had no budget to pay performers and offered on-air credit to sponsors that provided lecturers and entertainers.

The following day LaGuardia ordered the station to cease the practice: "I told them to make no more announcements that are nothing else but advertisements."[40] The mayor said he had considered closing the station, but decided to put WNYC "on probation" until the end of the year; if the station proved unable to produce educational and informative programming and to eliminate "commercial" broadcasts, it would be closed.[41] Two weeks later

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[36]Hecksher, 37-38; Kessner, 262-265.

[37]"Closing of WNYC Denied in N.Y.C." 14; "WNYC Status in Doubt," *Broadcasting* (1 February 1934),12.

[38]"Closing of WNYC Denied in N.Y.C." 14.

[39]"LaGuardia Bars Advertising on Station WNYC," *New York Herald Tribune* (19 June 1934), 13; "Mayor Threatens to Stop City Radio," *New York Times* (19 June 1934), 21.

[40]"Mayor Threatens to Stop City Radio," 21.

[41]"LaGuardia Bars Advertising on Station WNYC," 13; "Mayor Threatens to Stop City Radio," 21.

LaGuardia named three prominent local radio executives to examine and report on the "present status and future possibilities" of the municipal station.[42] The committee was chaired by Richard C. Patterson, Jr., executive vice president of NBC who was active in New York politics and had served as the city's Commissioner of Correction;[43] William S. Paley, president of the Columbia Broadcasting System; and Alfred J. McCosker, president of the Bamberger Broadcasting System, which operated WOR radio, who was also president of the National Association of Broadcasters.

**Impact of the Patterson Committee**

The committee issued its report on October 25, 1934.[44] Concluding that WNYC was in a "rundown condition,"[45] the report was critical of the station on numerous fronts. The Patterson Committee, as it came to be known, pointed out to Mayor LaGuardia that some 30 radio stations operated within a 30-mile radius of Manhattan in 1934, and that WNYC needed to be competitive in program quality and signal strength to attract listeners.[46] The Patterson Committee recommended: that the transmitter be relocated and modernized; that new studios be constructed with proper acoustics and ventilation; that additional personnel be hired, especially in an enhanced programming department that would include a staff orchestra, as well as a station publicist and a statistician to

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[42]"3 Radio Men Named For WNYC Report," *New York Times* (3 July 1934), 21.
[43]Kessner, 241 .
[44]*Report of the Mayor's Committee to Study the Present Status and Future Possibilities of Broadcasting Station WNYC* (25 October 1934), 10 pp. (Document in MRL), hereafter referred to as *Patterson Report.*
[45]*Patterson Report*, 9.
[46]*Patterson Report*, 4.

measure audiences; and that Local Law #5 be amended to allow WNYC to operate as a commercial station.[47] The committee estimated its plan to move WNYC to "first-class" commercial operation would cost $275,000.[48]

After studying the report, Mayor LaGuardia decided, albeit reluctantly, to continue operating WNYC as a non-commercial station. [49] "I think the members of the committee are right (about the rundown nature of the station), but I am going to play along with the equipment I have and try to build up the station," the mayor told reporters.[50] However, the prestige of the panel dictated that its report be taken seriously, and many of the Patterson Committee's recommendations were implemented ultimately.

The availability of New Deal funding from the federal government played a pivotal role. The municipal station drew employees from the Civil Works Administration, the National Youth Administration and the Works Progress Administration.[51] Musicians were recruited to form a 28-piece studio orchestra in November 1934.[52] WNYC also added a publicist in 1934 and began issuing press releases promoting its programs.[53] In 1935 the station began publishing the *Masterwork Bulletin*, listing the musical selections to

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[47] *Patterson Report*, 6-8.

[48] *Patterson Report*, 8.

[49] "WNYC Needs $275,000; Won't Get It, Says Mayor," *New York Herald Tribune* (28 October 1934), 20; "WNYC To Continue At Mayor's Order," *New York Times* (28 October 1934), 20.

[50] "WNYC To Continue At Mayor's Order," 20 (parenthetical information not in original).

[51] Luscombe, 162-167.

[52] "WNYC Range Widens Today," *New York Times* (1 November 1934), 24.

[53] Miscellaneous titled/untitled WNYC publicity releases (between 1934 and 1939), WNYC file at MRL.

be played on WNYC's "Masterwork Hour" program of classical music, and providing a means of communicating with listeners.[54] Attempts at audience research were also initiated during the period following the Patterson Committee report.[55]

Finally, the station's technical deficiencies were gradually addressed. The city received FCC approval to increase its effective radiated power from 500 watts to 1,000 watts in November of 1934.[56] In 1937 new studios, sound-proofed and air-conditioned, were built. [57] WNYC's signal strength improved considerably after the transmitter site was moved in 1937 across the East River to Brooklyn.[58] The WPA provided funds and construction workers to build the new transmitter.

**The Rise and Fall of Public Affairs on the Air**

The improvements prompted by the Patterson Committee ensured the survival of WNYC as a viable radio station. Its programming in the late 1930s was dominated by classical music -- reflecting federal support for the station orchestra and LaGuardia's musical tastes -- consumer-service programs presented by city agencies[59], and educational programs in conjunction with area universities. The station's program schedule, however, lacked

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[54] *Masterwork Bulletin* (May/June 1935), Pamphlet in MRL.

[55] "Plan Study of WNYC's Fan Mail," (4 December 1936), News release in WNYC file (MRL); "WNYC Study of Radio and Music," (November 1939), Questionnaire in WNYC file (MRL).

[56] "WNYC Range Widens Today," 24.

[57] "A New 'Voice' for the City," *New York Times* (24 October 1937), sec. XI, 14; "City's Radio Station Opens New Studios," *New York Times* (25 October 1937), 4.

[58] "Station WNYC To Get Towers in Brooklyn," *New York Times* (15 December 1935), 12.

[59] These included such items as information on food prices and menu suggestions from the Department of Markets, and venereal disease prevention tips from the Department of Health. See assorted publicity releases, August 1930, WNYC files, MRL.

substantial discussion of public affairs. This reflected a timidity rooted in earlier conflicts over partisanship and the emphasis of the Patterson Committee, comprised of commercial broadcasters, upon building audience through programs that entertained more than they "served."

Nonetheless, the station's assistant program director, Seymour Siegel initiated a series of live broadcasts of government proceedings.[60] Siegel, the son of a U.S. congressman,[61] brought WNYC microphones into the Coast Guard inquiry into the Morro Castle disaster; into hearings of congressional committees investigating un-American activities and patent practices; and even into a municipal traffic court.[62] In this manner Siegel pioneered the notion of live public affairs coverage that would later become common in public broadcasting and invigorated the municipal station. It was Siegel's decision in 1938 to broadcast meetings of the New York City Council that prompted the most celebrated episode in WNYC's early history.

Listening to the council broadcasts became a major source of entertainment for New Yorkers during 1938 and 1939; the polemics and bombast became so amusing at times that some citizens left their radios and went to City Hall to view the proceedings directly.[63] Listenership figures of unspecified origin announced by the station

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[60]WNYC had previously carried news of city government meetings over in the form of minutes broadcast *after the fact.*

[61]For more background on Siegel, see Robert J. Blakely, *To serve the public interest: Educational broadcasting in the United States* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1979).

[62]Luscombe, 168-174.

[63]Heckscher, 259.

put the audience at one million.[64] In one widely reported incident, comedian Eddie Cantor sent a telegram to LaGuardia, offering to buy audio recordings of council meetings to use on his popular network radio program. Cantor said he reserved the right to "take out what I think is too funny."[65] Some council members became concerned about the public image of the body. As one councilman noted: "If the old Board of Aldermen had taken 135 years to make fools of themselves, the council had accomplished the same result in two years."[66] The council voted 13-7 to ban the WNYC broadcasts early in 1940. Though the *New York Times* editorialized that "the ban on the microphone is a step away from that searching glare of publicity which the unashamed lawmaker does not shun," the municipal station had again been censured for airing the public affairs of the municipality.[67]

WNYC would return to local prominence during World War II through LaGuardia's Sunday radio talks, which began in 1942.[68] The mayor's broadcasts stemmed from his desire to inform the city about the war effort but evolved into a wide-ranging, extemporaneous discussion of city affairs. During a newspaper strike in 1945, LaGuardia read the comics over the air, for which

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[64]WNYC was known to estimate audiences based upon the "assumption" that one letter received from a listener represented about 1,000 listeners. For its 1938 election coverage, the municipal station announced that one million people had tuned in, after receiving 1,000 letters. See untitled publicity releases (1939), WNYC file, MRL.

[65]Quoted in Keenan, 6-7.

[66]Hart, quoted in "WNYC broadcasts banned by council," *New York Times*, 17 January 1940, p. 21.

[67]"The council closes its door," *New York Times*, 18 January 1940, p. 22.

[68]John R. Hutchens, "His Honor: Radio showman," *New York Times Magazine*, 16 July 1944, 14,41; "Patience and fortitude," *New Yorker*, 6 November 1943, 20-21; "Peanut whistle," *Newsweek*, 18 July 1949, 44-45.

many New Yorkers best remember him. However, the municipal component of the WNYC schedule had become timorous. In later years the station became known primarily for its classical music, along with gavel-to-gavel broadcasts of United Nations proceedings, university lectures and roundtable discussions, and an occasional broadcast of a local public hearing.[69] *Municipal* broadcasting, which had begun to flourish briefly in the late 1930s, faded, replaced by what would become known as *public* broadcasting.

**A Failed Experiment?**

New York City was not alone among government entities in experimenting with radio. The City of Dallas, Texas, was the first municipality to operate a government-run station, putting WRR on the air late in 1921 to serve its police and fire departments. Chicago established WBU in 1922.[70] By 1927 the FRC had licensed 15 radio stations to municipalities and other non-educational government agencies.[71] However, by 1934 only six such stations remained licensed,[72] and by 1938 the FCC reported there were just two.[73] Certainly these stations were subject to the same pressures that

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[69]Stavitsky, 67-87.

[70]George H. Douglas, *The early days of radio broadcasting* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1987), 33.

[71]U.S Department of Commerce, Radio Division, *Commercial and government radio stations of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1927). In addition to 10 municipal licensees, stations were operated by such entities as the Los Angeles County Forestry Department, the Pennsylvania State Police, the Maryland National Guard, the Wisconsin Department of Markets, and the Missouri State Marketing Bureau.

[72]Federal Radio Commission, *Radio broadcast stations in the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1934).

[73]WNYC and WCAM, Camden, N.J. Federal Communications Commission, *Fourth annual report of the Federal Communications Commission* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1939). By this time the Wisconsin Department of Markets station, WLBL, was simulcast with the University of Wisconsin's WHA, and was therefore considered educational.

forced many educational stations of the era off the air: a shortage of public funds during the Depression and the efforts of commercial stations to take over the frequency assignments and time allocations of educational stations.[74] However, if the WNYC example is emblematic, these stations may also have suffered from lack of vision.

For commercial radio stations, the objectives were clear, to entertain listeners and attract advertisers. What then was the purpose of a municipal station? WNYC's early managers conceived of the station broadly, as a way to extend the reach of city services, and specifically, to improve the function of the police department.[75] They were unable, however, to come up with programming that fulfilled this mission. Broadcasts of missing persons and mundane details of city agencies failed to attract an audience. As the Patterson Committee noted, New Yorkers generally found the station's civic programming to be tedious and its cultural programming less appealing than the entertainment provided by commercial stations. Further, the city's mayors viewed WNYC as a soapbox, which drew the station into the caldron of local politics.

Station managers learned to avoid controversy during a period in which influential local politicians frequently called for WNYC's elimination.[76] Cultural programming, such as classical music and

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[74]S.E. Frost, *Education's own stations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937); Werner J. Severin, "Commercial v. non-commercial radio during broadcasting's early years," *Journal of Broadcasting* 22: 491-504 (1978).

[75]"City's plant tests device for radio calls to one, several or all police stations," *New York Times*, 17 January 1925, 1.

[76]"Lyons, over WNYC, asks end of WNYC," *New York Times*, 3 April 1939, 3; "O'Dwyer assails markets policy," *New York Times*, 24 October 1941, 15; "WNYC says it gives 48% of time to war," *New York Times*, 12 May 1942, 13.

drama, was safe, as was radio education. Siegel became active in the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, even serving as NAEB president.[77] WNYC took on the "sound" of educational radio in the manner pioneered by the stations licensed to major Midwestern land-grant universities, such as Illinois, Ohio State and Wisconsin. This stations generally presented lectures by university faculty, information programs for homemakers and farmers, along with broadcasts of university drama groups and live and recorded classical music.[78]

Educational radio evolved into public radio with the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967[79] and the creation of National Public Radio.[80] Accordingly, WNYC adapted in the same style as did many of the former educational stations, which commonly broadcast a mix of classical music or jazz, NPR news and public affairs programs, and local call-in shows. The municipal station's broadcast schedule in 1993 was dominated by such programs.[81]

The station's legacy of political interference by New York mayors continued. In 1979 Mayor Edward Koch directed WNYC to broadcast the so-called "John Hour" -- actually two minutes of names of people charged with soliciting prostitutes, which was the

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[77]Blakely, 7.

[78]For examples of educational station programming, see *Radio broadcast programs: 1922-1926*, J.S. Penn papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; *University Radio Committee annual reports* from 1940s and 1950s, Harold Engel papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; *WEAO Program Bulletins* from 1920s and 1930s and *WOSU Program Bulletins* from 1940s and 1950s in WOSU files, Ohio State University Archives, Columbus.

[79]U.S. Congress, Public Law 90-129.

[80]Robert K. Avery and Robert Pepper, "Balancing the equation: Public radio comes of age," *Public Telecommunications Review* 7:19-30 (1979).

[81]See *Wavelength*, WNYC's bimonthly program guide.

subject of a police crackdown. Critics charged that the incident underscored anew the municipal station's vulnerability to political pressure.[82] In 1990 the station's long-time manager, a Koch appointee, was replaced by the press secretary of the new mayor, David Dinkins.[83] These periodic episodes notwithstanding, few apparent ties to the municipality exist at WNYC.

**Discussion**

Could WNYC have developed municipal broadcasting into a viable form, distinct from commercial or educational radio, and true to the Progressive ideals of its founders? The case of WCFL, the radio station of the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL), may be instructive in considering this question. The CFL intended the station to promote the labor ideology and counter what it perceived as "anti-union propaganda" presented on commercial stations.[84] WCFL's managers sought to build a large audience by keeping the labor-related programs brief and by surrounding them with classical music, vaudeville comedy, dance hall music, foreign language programs to reach Chicago's immigrant population, and even broadcasts of Cubs and White Sox baseball games. However, as with WNYC, WCFL experienced political and economic pressures and the station's program fare eventually became indistinguishable from other local broadcasters; when the CFL sold WCFL to the Mutual

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[82]Joyce Purnick, "A new era at WNYC spurs debate on influence of its benefactors," *New York Times*, 20 December 1979, B1-2.

[83]Jack Robertiello, "Nichols, Aaron out at WNYC," *Current*, 12 March 1990, 4,17.

[84]Robert W. McChesney, "Labor and the marketplace of ideas: WCFL and the battle for labor radio broadcasting, 1927-1934," *Journalism Monographs* 134 (August 1992).

Broadcasting System in the 1970s, the station was programming a rock music format with no labor-related programming.[85]

Several significant differences between WNYC and WCFL should be noted, including the labor station's commercial operation and avowed ideological stance. Nonetheless, the histories of these two stations illuminate the difficulty in implementing a vision for a model of broadcasting distinct from the commercial and educational/public paradigms. This vision has at its heart a different conception of audience, of listeners as participants and subjects, rather than as *objects*, to be captured on behalf of advertisers as consumers or on behalf of public stations as contributors. Such a model foregrounds conceptions of the communication needs of a democracy -- as perceived by Chicago's labor leaders, the pacifists who formed the network of Pacifica radio stations[86] or the Progressive politicians who started WNYC.

However, the civil servants who ran New York's municipal station did not know how to realize the amorphous vision of WNYC's founders. In the 1930s they adopted the slogan, "The Voice of the City," for the station. But WNYC was really the voice of city government, not the people of New York. The municipal station was generally unable to engage the citizenry, and when WNYC finally did

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[85]McChesney, 31. Though the CFL intended for its members to subsidize the cost of running WCFL, the station was unable to meet its expenses and was forced to sell advertising.

[86]For discussion of Pacifica's history and philosophy, see Peter M. Lewis and Jerry Booth, *The invisible medium: Public, commercial and community radio* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1990), 115-118. For a comparison of Pacifica and NPR, see Alan G. Stavitsky and Timothy W. Gleason, "Alternative Things Considered: A Comparison of National Public Radio and Pacifica Radio news coverage," paper to be presented at the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Washington, DC, May 1993.

so with the City Council broadcasts, it was condemned. What if WNYC had responded to the Hylan controversy by regularly making airtime available to competing political viewpoints, produced programs about the city's numerous immigrant groups instead of missing persons, and made its microphones available to city residents rather than just city officials? There was room for such an approach in the wide-open, experimental, early days of radio. Unfortunately, the station's managers lacked the sophistication and the politicians lacked the will to make the municipal station any more responsive to the people of New York City than to provide fine music, food prices and the police blotter.

This study thus illustrates the chronic search for purpose in U.S. public broadcasting. Aufderheide poses these questions in the context of public television: "Is it to aid the democratic process...or to deliver the cultural cream? Is it to make public the voices of underrepresented minorities of a pluralist society? Is it to be 'quality' television or instead 'anti-television'?"[87] If public broadcasters continue to wrestle with these issues after seven decades of service, the failure of New York City's municipal broadcasting experiment should hardly be surprising.

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[87]Patricia Aufderheide, "Public television and the public sphere," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8: 168-183 (1991), 171.